Wauwatosa School District: An Exposé of Funding, Performance, and Possible Corruption (2016–2025)

By Fernando Topete

Massive Funding Influx Since 2016

Wauwatosa's schools have seen a surge of taxpayer funding since 2016, yet many are questioning where the money went. In 2018, voters approved a **$124.9 million facilities referendum** to rebuild or upgrade schoolstmj4.comtmj4.com. This ambitious project replaced four aging elementary buildings – including a new facility for Wilson/WSTEM – and made security and infrastructure upgrades at nearly every other schooltmj4.comtmj4.com. The referendum passed with 61% support, raising local **property taxes** by an average of $1.48 per $1,000 of home value over 20 yearstmj4.com. By 2021 the construction was largely completedtmj4.com, and the district's **annual spending spiked** to $151–168 million during the building phase (far above the usual ~$90 million)publicschoolreview.compublicschoolreview.com.

Despite this major capital investment, district officials soon claimed **more money was needed**. By 2024, they identified **$130 million in deferred maintenance** still remaining on other aging facilitieswauwatosa.k12.wi.us. The district's five-year projection showed a **$61 million budget shortfall** (through 2029) if revenue didn't increasewauwatosa.k12.wi.us. In fall 2024, Wauwatosa asked voters to approve **two new referendums** – a $16 million per year operational levy and another $60 million for capital projectsmaciverinstitute.com. Taxpayers who had barely finished funding the last overhaul were stunned to be asked for **$124 million more** (total over 20 years)cbs58.comcbs58.com. This pattern of constant requests has raised suspicions about financial stewardship.

Budget Errors, Deficits, and Lack of Transparency

Financial red flags in Wauwatosa came to a head in 2023–2024. The school board **approved a deficit budget** of $95.9 million for 2023–24 that was **$7.1 million in the red from the start**maciverinstitute.com. By mid-2024, the district's new Chief Financial Officer (CFO), Scot Ecker, revealed the situation was even worse: the district had **overspent roughly $8 million more than reported in the 2022–23 budget**cbs58.comcbs58.com. In August 2024, Ecker discovered an additional **$4.2 million budgeting "error"** in the new 2024–25 budget – a gap between projected expenses and reality that his predecessor had inexplicably missedcbs58.comcbs58.com. This meant the district was **over $12 million in the red** when combining the overspend and the new errormaciverinstitute.com. Notably, these mistakes only came to light **after** the previous CFO departed; **no one alerted the school board or**

Superintendent at the time the budget was being blown, according to Eckercbs58.comcbs58.com.

District leadership insists there was *no fraudulent activity*, just a "poorly built budget" and lax oversightcbs58.comcbs58.com. All the excess spending went toward Board-approved items like salaries and operations – but **basic accounting controls failed**cbs58.comcbs58.com. Ecker, a veteran school finance expert, said in 25 years he's "never seen anything like this"cbs58.comcbs58.com. At an August 2024 board meeting, **parents and residents erupted** in frustration. "It's a big budget, and some of these oversights **should've been caught**," one speaker notedtmj4.com. **Calls for transparency and accountability** rang out, marking the first time many had publicly confronted the board over financestmj4.com.

Under pressure, Superintendent Dr. Demond Means **issued an apology**. "I want to express my deep regret for this," the superintendent told the community, as he and Board members pledged to "do better"tmj4.comtmj4.com. The Board scrambled to plug the immediate $4 million hole by raising employee health insurance premiums and leaving some jobs unfilled, which would only cover a fraction of the shortfalltmj4.com. They discussed short-term borrowing and other stopgaps. Importantly, **community members demanded a forensic audit** of the district's finances – similar to what was being done in Milwaukee Public Schools – to ensure no money was misappropriated and to rebuild trusttmj4.comtmj4.com. "We heard it was bad math… and it's not acceptable," said Kate Bertram, a Wauwatosa parent, adding that the public "need(s) to trust the numbers again"tmj4.comtmj4.com.

District officials have since taken steps toward **greater transparency**. CFO Ecker implemented new controls: detailed quarterly financial reports with projections, a new budgeting software system, and internal cross-checks to prevent any single point of failurecbs58.com. He emphasized that "moving forward, transparency is key" to avoid repeating these errorscbs58.com. The administration even indicated plans to hire an outside firm to monitor spending in real timetmj4.com. However, these fixes come after the fact – **for years, the district essentially refused or failed to disclose its true spending**, only admitting the multi-million-dollar mistake once a new set of eyes looked at the books. This opacity, whether by negligence or design, has fueled community concerns that something **corrupt or unethical** might be lurking beneath the "honest mistake" narrative.

Allegations of Mismanagement and Corruption

The financial mess has fed a broader narrative of **mismanagement at the highest levels** of Wauwatosa School District. A growing group of parents and taxpayers – notably the **"2030 Tosa" Task Force** – has openly questioned Superintendent Demond Means' leadership and even called for his ousercbs58.com. In spring 2025, about two dozen protesters gathered outside the

district office with signs, demanding the firing of Dr. Means **and** a principal accused of poor performance (McKinley Elementary's principal)cbs58.comcbs58.com. Their grievances go beyond the balance sheet: they accuse Means and his team of **not listening to community input, concealing problems, and making decisions that undermine educational quality**. One parent at the protest argued that Dr. Means behaves as if the elected board "works for him" as his *"minions"*, instead of being accountable to familiescbs58.comcbs58.com. The implication is an insular administration dismissive of concerns – a recipe for unaccountable (and potentially unethical) behavior.

WSTEM Closure Controversy: A flashpoint in the corruption allegations is the handling of the district's specialty schools and programs. In 2024, Superintendent Means proposed **eliminating the standalone STEM and Montessori programs** – including closing Wauwatosa STEM (WSTEM) Elementary, a high-achieving charter school within the districtwill-law.orgwill-law.org. His justification, as documented in district task force materials, was that these programs serve a student population "not as diverse as the District's overall population," and thus pose a "challenge" to equitywauwatosa.k12.wi.us. In other words, WSTEM's enrollment was disproportionately white (due to a lottery admission system with <14% acceptance rate)wauwatosa.k12.wi.us, and Means sought to "balance student populations based on race" by folding these programs into general schoolswill-law.org. Critics were outraged – not only were they losing a unique educational option, but **WSTEM was one of the highest-performing schools in the state**will-law.org. Shuttering a top school in the name of racial balancing struck many as **ideologically driven and wasteful**, especially since taxpayers had funded a brand-new WSTEM facility just a couple years priortmj4.com. The Wisconsin Institute for Law & Liberty (WILL), a legal watchdog group, even warned the district that using **race as a basis to sort students is unconstitutional** and could jeopardize federal fundingwill-law.org. In a scathing letter to Dr. Means, WILL called his plan "improper" and pointed out that it amounted to "sorting and balancing students based on race" – a potentially **illegal policy**will-law.orgwill-law.org.

WSTEM parents and the 2030 Task Force see this episode as emblematic of the district's dysfunction. They argue that **administrators prioritize social engineering over academic excellence**, and do so in a non-transparent way. "Everything the district has been advertising has not come true. There's been a lot of empty promises…that just don't pass the logic test," said one frustrated WSTEM parent at a board meetingcbs58.comcbs58.com. The decision to dismantle a successful program, combined with the financial blunders, led this group to conclude that the **"corruption" in Wauwatosa runs from Dr. Demond Means on down** – whether that means actual fraud or simply a culture of incompetence, broken trust, and misplaced priorities.

Questionable Spending Priorities: Digging into how Wauwatosa has been spending its money reveals decisions that some label as misguided or self-serving. For instance, over the last few years the district dramatically increased payroll expenses – **teacher and staff salaries rose about 21% on average in just three years** (2019–2022)go.boarddocs.com. Taking care of staff is important, but such rapid raises, far outpacing inflation, were granted even as enrollment stagnated and academic results faltered. The district also **expanded administration and support roles**: it used one-time federal COVID relief (ESSER) funds to hire additional mental health and social-emotional staff and has now **absorbed those positions into the ongoing budget**, despite the temporary funding running outgo.boarddocs.com. In 2023, Dr. Means created a new **"Family and Community Engagement Coordinator" position**, explicitly to improve outreach to diverse families and advance equity goalsgo.boarddocs.com. While noble in intention, this adds another salary (and bureaucracy) that **did not exist before**, even as the district faces deficits. These choices reflect the administration's values – emphasizing equity and student wellness – but critics ask if they came at the expense of fiscal stability and core academics. Each new hire and initiative diverts funds that could have reduced class sizes or bolstered lagging math/reading programs. **No one has suggested outright embezzlement of funds** – but allocating scarce dollars to pet projects or bloating central office staff, only to then **plead poverty and raise taxes**, strikes many as a form of malfeasance.

It's telling that even after the multi-million budget mistake, some district defenders focused not on internal accountability but on blaming external forces. At a board meeting, one pro-Means parent group (Support Our Schools Wauwatosa) argued the real issue is **insufficient state funding** and urged angry parents to lobby Madison for more moneycbs58.comcbs58.com. However, Wisconsin's legislature has actually **increased K-12 funding in recent years** at historic levels (including a $140 million referendum in Milwaukee)maciverinstitute.commaciverinstitute.com. The MacIver Institute, a policy watchdog, noted that Wauwatosa's plight is self-inflicted – the district **knowingly operated in deficit** and failed basic accounting, even as statewide funding rosemaciverinstitute.commaciverinstitute.com. From the community's perspective, Wauwatosa's leadership seems eager to ask for more taxpayer money while being **unwilling or unable to account for how current funds are spent**. This lack of candor, and the perception of shifting blame, has only fueled the anger.

Declining Academic Performance and Demographic Changes

All this spending and upheaval in Wauwatosa's schools might be easier to swallow if student outcomes were improving. **The opposite has happened.** By multiple measures, the district's academic performance has **declined since 2016**, even as total expenditures climbed. On state standardized tests, Wauwatosa has seen proficiency rates drop and its relative ranking tumble.

In 2016, about **56% of students were proficient in reading**; by 2022, that fell below 50%publicschoolreview.com. Math proficiency likewise dipped from the mid-50s to around **50% in 2023**publicschoolreview.compublicschoolreview.com. (Some of this slide mirrors a statewide post-pandemic downturn, but Wauwatosa's scores were slipping even before COVID.) The district's overall **accountability rating** on the state report card went from a high "Exceeds Expectations" in the mid-2010s to a lower score in recent years. One metric shows Wauwatosa's **state rank dropped from #60 in 2017 to #92 in 2022** (out of ~450 districts)publicschoolreview.com. In other words, a district once comfortably in the top tier has slid toward the middle of the pack. This decline has occurred under a succession of leaders, including Dr. Means (who took over in mid-2021), raising questions about the efficacy of the district's strategies.

Meanwhile, **achievement gaps persist**. Wauwatosa's student body has become more diverse over the past decade, which provides important context for the test score declines. The share of **white students fell from ~65% in 2016 to about 60% in 2023**, while students of color now make up 40% of enrollmentpublicschoolreview.compublicschoolreview.com. Notably, the **Hispanic population grew** (from 6% to 9%) and multiracial students increased (6% to 8%) during that timepublicschoolreview.compublicschoolreview.com. The **Black student population has long been around 17–19%** (significantly higher than Wisconsin's 9% state average) and remains sopublicschoolreview.compublicschoolreview.com. Wauwatosa also accepts a high number of **open-enrollment students from Milwaukee**, a practice the district itself admits is "unconventional" and has **increased expenses by requiring extra staffing and class sections**wauwatosa.k12.wi.uswauwatosa.k12.wi.us. The open enrollment policy has helped maintain building capacity, but it also means Wauwatosa serves more non-resident (often lower-income, minority) students than a typical suburb.

Why do these demographic details matter? Unfortunately, in Wisconsin (as in much of the U.S.), there are well-documented **achievement gaps** – on average, Black and Hispanic students score lower on state tests than their white peers, due to a complex mix of socioeconomic factors, historical inequities, and opportunity gaps. **Wauwatosa's own data reflect this**: for example, the district's task force noted that specialized programs like WSTEM had far fewer minority students than the overall districtwauwatosa.k12.wi.us, implicitly acknowledging that many students of color were concentrated in other schools that may be struggling. As the proportion of higher-need students increased, the district's **overall proficiency averages fell**, a trend exacerbated by pandemic disruptions. It's important to stress that **correlation is not causation** – diverse schools can certainly excel, and Wauwatosa still outperforms state averages in absolute terms (around 49% proficiency vs ~38% statewide)publicschoolreview.compublicschoolreview.com. However, the district **has not effectively closed racial achievement gaps**, and some critics argue that in chasing equity initiatives (like scrapping WSTEM), the district is *penalizing* success instead of

lifting up underperforming groups. As one community member put it, **"we're losing families"** – both white and minority – **"because they're unhappy with what's happening in WSD."**m.facebook.com The combination of lower scores and divisive policy changes has contributed to an exodus of some "unhappy consumers" (families pulling their kids out), which only worsens the financial and performance challenges.

Conclusion: A District at a Crossroads

Since 2016, **tens of millions of new dollars** have flowed into Wauwatosa's schools – from local tax hikes, state aid, and federal grants – yet the return on investment appears dismal. New school buildings and more administrators have **not prevented declining test scores** or boosted community confidence. Instead, the district is now defined by **budget bungling, opaque communication, and infighting over priorities**. While no one has unearthed proof of outright embezzlement or personal enrichment of officials, the **pattern of mismanagement is palpable**. When a public institution loses track of $12 millionmaciverinstitute.com, keeps critical information from its overseers and the publiccbs58.com, and then repeatedly asks taxpayers for bailouts, it's not hard to see why "corruption" is on people's minds. At the very least, Wauwatosa's leaders have **broken the community's trust**.

The facts laid out in this exposé paint a troubling picture: **money poured in, but achievement went down**publicschoolreview.compublicschoolreview.com. The **Wauwatosa School District's administration – from Dr. Demond Means on down – has a lot to answer for.** They have presided over avoidable financial errors, pushed contentious programs ostensibly to engineer demographic outcomes, and failed to deliver the academic excellence that parents expect. As of 2025, Wauwatosa stands at a crossroads. Community members are more engaged (and enraged) than ever, demanding audits, **new leadership, and real transparency**. Whether the school board and administration will heed those calls or continue with business as usual remains to be seen. What is clear is that **every factual indicator – from the budget ledgers to the test score sheets – suggests something is very wrong** in Wauwatosa. The parents, taxpayers, and students deserve much better than excuses and "poorly built" planscbs58.com. It's their money and their children's future on the line, and they are finally insisting on accountability for both.

Sources: Recent news reports, official district documents, and state data have been used to compile this report. Key references include local journalism (TMJ4, CBS 58, WISN) detailing the budget errors and community reactionstmj4.comcbs58.com, the MacIver Institute's analysis of school spending scandalsmaciverinstitute.com, Wauwatosa School District's own published plans and figureswauwatosa.k12.wi.usgo.boarddocs.com, and Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction data on demographics and performancepublicschoolreview.compublicschoolreview.com. All statistics and quotations are

drawn from these verified sources to ensure a factual account of the Wauwatosa School District's situation.